

Calcutta: A [Sub]Alter[n] Biography of a City 1947-51

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A city is a mosaic of life—a complimentary maze that accommodates growth and adjusts on Kafkaesque mechanism of metamorphosis at the “urban turn”¹ adding to the dexterity of cities. One might then ask in Virginia Woolf’s trait: “What is the meaning of life?” and link it to: What does it mean to live in the cities? It is a simple question, as she says, but what complex answers can it give when life is not just the physicality of being but a combination of where it has been lived, how it has been lived and the differential pathways taken and *prima facie* who lives this life. Calcutta has remained a unique city in many ways to be termed truly as a “living city” hinting at the milieus of urbanity and urbanization not simply in its archaeological dimension of analysing its vertical growth as a city but as a social system that sustained time and grew horizontally as was the rich imagination of life in the city and its vices—a milieustic congruity and resilience that made Calcutta a colonial capital, a port city, an industrial city, a labouring city, an administrative city, a city of refuge and of migrants, and many more into the one melting pot of the geo-sociality of Calcutta that operated together yet markedly with different hues of its own. Such essentiality according to Tapan Raychaudhuri made “Calcutta a truly cosmopolitan city with people from varied ethnic backgrounds. But the ethnic mix in Calcutta was like a badly cooked curry—different ingredients remained separate, refusing to be part of a harmonious curry.” This recognizably separate yet dependant agglomeration might hint according to him at the “insularity of the people” but also of collaborative footprints in the making of city that one can witness in the images of people moving in the city’s public transports as “passengers tightly packed like sardines in a very small tin.” This essay is precisely a biographical narration of this city of Calcutta that was more than Kiplingian description of a “chance erected, chance directed” city makes a call for a “different history” in its process of passage to a true post-colony, a period that was a puzzle of re- and de-generation. The city here is to be seen through its phases of urbanization as a repertoire of experiences, a story that oscillates between the “craft of history and art of biography” giving a humanistic appeal to the forlorn world of labouring subalternity that keeps going back to the expression “who built these cities” not just as a question but a statement. Using Ayse Caglar’s “city as a method” and applying it to the case of Calcutta, the first global city of colonial India, the attempt is to view and map the life of labour, both axiomatically co-relevant to the other. To read the city through its different notions of being devoid of empathy, machineries of modernity, compassion, extractive labour etc., and more essentially to visualise Calcutta as a city that was in perpetual motion. The intertwined tapestry of the lived experiences in the labouring zones of Calcutta is a strong social commentary of the consequential ecologies of labouring behaviour and patterns of life both modified by and modifying the city at the same time. To find the labouring experiences within the city is to search and see for the Asawian sculpting of “form within a form.”⁶ A city is a powerful reminder of productive modernity. While city making is a planned industrious process of populating and popularising a designed spatial area, servicing the cities is a much more autonomous process that synchronously works as a value generating process gratifying the capitalist framework of the cities, slowly transforming the solitude of waste through land reclamation and the aesthetics of agony generated in the process becomes part of the silent receptacles of fortitude of cities.